



Writing Skills

About this Topic: Writing Skills



Topic Mentor

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Deborah Dumaine is the president and founder of Better Communications, a learning company that delivers globally recognized business, leadership, technical, financial, and sales writing workshops. Since 1978, 86,000 learners have attended Better Communications' workshops. Ms. Dumaine is the author of *Write to the Top: Writing for Corporate Success*, recently revised and republished by Random House, and of *The Instant-Answer Guide to Business Writing* (iUniverse). She also has contributed sections on business writing to the *World Book Encyclopedia*. Ms. Dumaine holds B.A. and M.A. degrees from Smith College.

Topic Source Notes

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What Would You Do?

What would you do?

Cindy's co-workers were usually supportive, but lately they weren't following through on her requests. She didn't understand why. Two weeks ago, when she e-mailed the conference summary to the team, she had included a note scheduling a Friday morning team meeting. When Friday arrived, however, only two people showed up. A week later, Cindy e-mailed everyone again—this time about monthly reports. In her message she included a note about executives visiting their staff meetings. The group acted surprised when the vice president of Corporate Sales attended the next meeting. Were her teammates ignoring her? Or was she simply not getting through to them?

What would you do?

E-mail is a recent innovation, but to use it well, Cindy will need to take a step back and reflect on the timeless principles of good written communication. She may not be connecting with her teammates because she's trying to convey too much information in her messages. As a general rule, each message should cover only one topic. If a message covers multiple topics and is lengthy, readers may get lost and not read the entire message. Cindy should make her messages concise—brevity is usually in everybody's best interest. Cindy should also make her purpose clear—both in the beginning of the message itself and in the subject line.

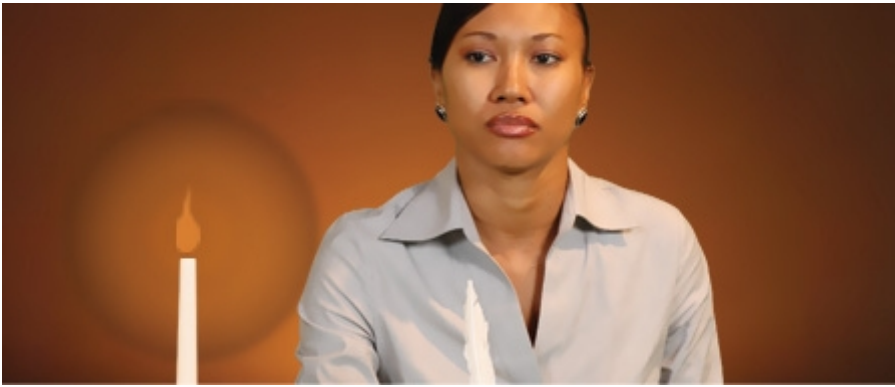
Do your written communications get the results you want?

Topic Objectives

This topic contains relevant information on how to:

- Organize your document according to your readers' needs
- Employ a variety of strategies for jump-starting your writing assignments
- Apply editing and design principles to heighten the impact of your message

Clarify your purpose



When setting out to write a business document, the first thing you should ask yourself is: "What is my reason for writing this document?" Business writing aims to serve many purposes, such as:

- **Explain or justify actions:** "Since all of the bids we received from our current vendors were high, we decided to reject them and seek others."
- **Convey information:** "Management wants all employees to know that quarterly sales of the new product exceeded expectations."
- **Influence the reader:** "The engineering team can meet these deadlines."
- **Deliver good or bad news:** "Unfortunately, the engine fire you reported occurred one day after the expiration of the warranty."
- **Request action:** "The design team should complete and deliver the product specifications by May 1."

Keep your purpose in mind as you begin writing. Many writers, in attending to the mundane tasks of preparing a document, lose track of their purpose. To help you stay on course, jot your purpose down at the beginning of your draft as a reminder and refer back to it as you proceed. When you finish your draft, review it to make sure it fulfills your initial purpose.

Leadership Insight: Writing for strategic advantage

Many years ago I was meeting with my customer, Bob. He was the vice president of sales and marketing for one of the world's largest automobile manufacturers. He was worried about the quality of the writing in the organization.

He felt it was interfering with their global competitiveness and that it was fouling up a lot of their daily communications: Whether it was from the top office to customers, to dealers, to the field, things were not as they should be. I said, "Bob, no problem, I can take care of this," and I trotted out my writing quality checkpoints. You should get to the point; be straightforward, not passive, short sentences, use headlines, action requested. And he interrupted me. I will never forget what he said; it was very important.

He said, "You need to think about writing and what you do in a grander way, in a broader way. It's not just about writing, it's about our brand. This is our strategy. When we write to customers, we need to touch them and make them see how we're different and better. It has to do with who we are. Every time we communicate in writing, we're showing our brand. When we write internally, if we make a mistake, if we're unproductive, we slow things down, we're losing our competitive edge. That's what I want you to fix."

I thought about what Bob said. I knew that my writing techniques helped individuals with their personal brand. It helped them get promoted, it helped them get recognized, it made a difference for them in their careers, but I hadn't really realized that writing is a strategic advantage. He helped me connect the dots, he made me realize that writing can make or break your company's brand.

Exceptional writing can help to boost your organization's brand.

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President and Founder, Better Communications

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Deborah is a pioneer in improving business writing quality and strategy, with an emphasis on e-mail. Her process, The Six Steps to Reader-Centered Writing, has is a contributing force behind the brand success of many global companies. She founded Better Communications in 1978 and since then has been developing writing-improvement techniques and learning solutions in response to the needs of anyone who writes at work.

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Scope your project

Scoping your project means determining the breadth of your subject and how deeply you will cover it. You can scope your project broadly or narrowly.

For example, suppose you were writing a report on weaknesses in your company's marketing function. A broadly scoped report might include:

- Marketing's contribution to corporate goals
- Historic development of the company's marketing department
- Marketing's human resources
- Areas of specific performance problems
- Potential solutions

A narrowly scoped report on this topic would focus on only one or two areas and might include:

- Two areas of underperformance: dealer support and promotions
- Suggested remedies

How to determine the appropriate scope for your written piece? Let your purpose guide you. In the case of the marketing report just described, you might take a very broad approach if your purpose is to provide information to a task force assigned to study the department and potential solutions. That audience would want to know as much as possible about the department.

On the other hand, you'd probably use a narrow scope if you were communicating to senior management about the task force's actual findings. In this case your audience would be most interested in the specifics about the problems you've identified and your recommended solutions.

Key Idea: Take a "reader-centered" approach

Key Idea

Just as a company won't connect with its *customers* if it fails to consider their needs and attitudes, you won't connect with your *readers* if you don't understand them, their desires, and how they prefer to receive information.

Thinking, drafting, organizing, and editing from your readers' points of view improves clarity and drives action. When readers understand what you are trying to convey to them and what their next steps should be, it makes their jobs easier.

Why is having a reader-centered approach important? Consider this true story of a company that failed to analyze its audience when writing what seemed to be a simple postcard announcing a change of address. Neglecting to put itself in its readers' shoes, the company forgot to include one of the most vital pieces of information: the date of the move. Customers knew *where* to reach the company, but not *when* they should use the new address.

Want your readers to understand you? Understand them first.

State your key message clearly

“The difficulty is not to affect your reader, but to affect him precisely as you wish.”
—Robert Louis Stevenson

Once you identify the purpose of your document and have considered your audience, your next task is to isolate the key message you want your readers to remember. This message should be clear and concise—usually only one or two sentences.

For example, "In order to meet our customer's delivery deadline, we must complete the product design by May 1."

In many cases, your key message will be stated at or near the very beginning of your document, and the rest of the document will be used to flesh out the details and to answer the question "Why?" or "What are the implications of what I am proposing?"

Stick to one topic per document to optimize your document's clarity. If you find that you have two unrelated key messages, write two different documents.

Keep your message short and simple

Busy readers appreciate concise documents. In fact, shorter is better if the document still communicates the required information. Keeping your document short ensures that your key message stands out. Economy of words also saves your readers valuable time.

Consider the following example:

At her boss's suggestion, and with the help of corporate counsel, Joan wrote an apologetic letter to the five disgruntled customers who threatened to sue.

As a writer, your challenge is to know when a sentence has reached its optimal carrying capacity. In the preceding example sentences, knowledge of the audience is a useful guide. Do the readers need to know that Joan's boss suggested the letter or that corporate counsel was brought in? Is the fact that there were *five* disgruntled customers or that they threatened to sue relevant? If these bits of information are not necessary, consider cutting them.

Your sentence would then read:

Joan wrote an apologetic letter to the disgruntled customers.

Consider your delivery strategy



Effective writers know that even a well-written document will lose its impact if it doesn't come from the right person, at the right time, and in the right format.

Before you begin writing, consider from whom the communication should come. Should it come from you? Your boss? The entire team? The choice is bound to make a difference in reader impact.

Also consider whether you are writing your document too early or too late. If you write too early, people won't be ready to focus on the issue you're raising. If you wait too long, you'll lose the opportunity to make a suggestion or prevent a problem.

Finally, the format of your writing will also affect its impact. Consider your purpose, your audience, and the information you want to convey when choosing a format.

For example, to disseminate the findings of a customer satisfaction survey, you could send an e-mail summary of the report to the entire company and provide details on how to obtain the entire report. You might also invite management and other key parties to a presentation of the study's findings.

Deciding on the ideal format for your communication requires thought. Even if you use a written format, you may find that supplementing a document with verbal communication will help you obtain the greatest impact.

Leadership Insight: Customer service via e-mail

I got a call from Dave, the CEO of a financial services company, a large one. He had a problem with some of his most valued customers. He had spent years and millions of dollars creating the best call service center around.

His customers could call in, and people treated them fabulously. He was known for that. Suddenly he had a little concerning news. It turned out that his customers had turned to the virtual world and they wanted to do everything online. They didn't want to call the call center anymore. They wanted to write e-mails. They wanted to get e-mails back.

He said, "What are we going to do? All this investment in customer loyalty, can we transition to e-mail? Will it work? How do we do it?" I said, "It won't be easy, but we can do it." I said, "Let's start by figuring out what makes your call center so great." We did a study and we figured out that there were three things that made them outstanding.

One was their ability to feed back to the customer the concern and the issue and show that they understood it in the customer's terms. The second one was to be warm and friendly and to "smile" in their writing. And the third one was basically to make sure they clarified their deliverables, what they were going to do, when, and how.

So I said, "How about this for a plan?" And it was our plan. We did some training, we taught them a better writing process. In fact they needed to learn quite a bit about writing. And we selected some champions to keep the excitement going.

We figured out who were the best writers in the group and we made them coaches and guides. And we also gave them some tools and checklists so that they could see how they were doing and kind of hold up their writing to some standards. Armed with this new process and tools, they were actually able to make the transition. Most of them put away their headsets and they became better writers, and they wrote and they did a good job.

Every e-mail is really an opportunity for you to create customer loyalty and to keep your customers coming back. Take the time to do it right.

More and more customers are doing business through e-mail. How do you deliver customer service in writing?

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Anticipate readers' questions



Write down the questions your readers might have about your topic. This method helps you ensure that your document tells readers what they need to know. It also helps you anticipate readers' responses to your document.

For example, Gillian has to write a memo introducing a weekly interdepartmental meeting of employees collaborating on a new product launch. Trying to anticipate her readers' concerns, she produces the following questions:

- Why are we having these new meetings?
- What will be on the agenda?
- What do I need to prepare for the meetings?

By turning those questions into affirmative statements, Gillian can create the list of points she'll want to cover in her memo.

For example: "For the first meeting, please come prepared with your unit's work plans."

When using this method, consider your knowledge of the audience's interests and concerns. If you are not familiar with your audience, enlist someone with that familiarity to augment your list of anticipated questions.

Create a traditional outline

Creating a traditional outline works best for those who are able to picture a logical structure for a document before writing it. It is especially useful if you are an inexperienced writer, or if you need to cover a complex subject.

A traditional outline uses letters and Roman and Arabic numerals to indicate levels of information.

1. Uppercase Roman numeral, period	I.
2. Capital letter, period	A.
3. Arabic numeral, period	1.
4. Lowercase letter, period	a.
5. Arabic numeral in parentheses	(1)
6. Lowercase letter in parentheses	(a)
7. Lowercase Roman numeral in parentheses	(i)

For most business documents, three levels of headings (Roman numerals, capital letters, and Arabic numerals) should be sufficient.

Once you have an outline, ask yourself:

- Are all the topics and subtopics I need to cover listed here?
- Are they arranged in a logical sequence?
- Is there a clear beginning, middle, and ending?

Once you are satisfied with the logic and flow of your outline, begin fleshing out each line to create your document.

Use the brainstorm outline

The brainstorm outline is a free-form technique for jotting down ideas as fast as they come into your head. The free-association encouraged by the brainstorm outline helps boost your creativity. It is a particularly useful method when writing with a group, since it captures everyone's ideas at the beginning of the process. To create a brainstorm outline:

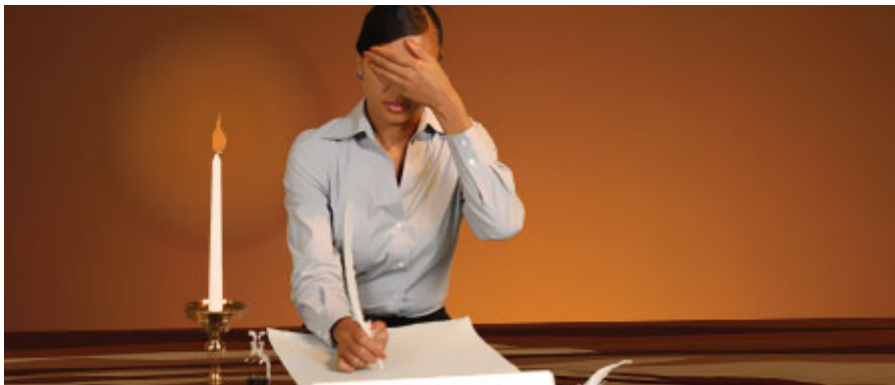
- Draw a circle in the middle of a sheet of paper.
- Write your purpose inside the circle. Remember, your purpose is the reason you're writing the document. Keep it simple: start with the word "to" and include an action verb such as

"persuade."

- As you think of ideas related to your topic, draw lines from the circle, like spokes of a wheel, and write each idea on a line.
- If an idea inspires other ideas related to it, draw more lines off from that line and write your ideas on them.
- If an idea comes to you that is entirely separate from the ideas you've written so far, draw a new line from the center circle.
- Continue to generate ideas, drawing lines from the center circle and from other lines.

Take care to define the main idea categories that come out of the center circle. Once you have them organized, those ideas are the topics you'll want to cover in your writing.

Try free writing



When you have writer's block, also known as "blank screen syndrome," free writing is often the best solution. Like the brainstorm outline, free writing lets your imagination roam, thus facilitating the expression of great ideas, whether on paper or on screen. The most important rule to remember about free writing is that there are no rules. To use the free-writing method:

- Put pen to paper or fingers to keyboard and let your mind wander.
- Write down anything that comes into your head, even if it has nothing to do with your writing topic.
- Free write for at least 10 minutes to get the ideas flowing.
- When you get stuck, write that down, too. Don't stop.
- Don't edit your work. If you're working at your computer, darkening the screen may help to keep you from editing prematurely.

When you've finished free writing, read what you've set down, highlighting important points and ideas. Then organize those points into logical categories, just as you would in a traditional or brainstorming outline or its brainstorming counterpart.

Activity: How will you start writing?

Different writing challenges call for different start-up strategies. Practice matching the right strategy to the right challenge.

You need to write a memo proposing a change to a key business process in your department. You realize that employees might resist the change, and that managers might not have time to train their employees to use the new process. Which start-up strategy would best help you start writing this memo?

- ☐ Anticipate your readers' questions

Correct choice. Focusing on the questions your readers might have is a great place to start in a situation where you anticipate that readers will have concerns about your proposal.

- ☐ Make a traditional outline

Not the best choice. Making a traditional outline would be a better start-up strategy if you needed to cover a complex subject or you had little experience with writing. The writing challenge you're facing in this case—presenting an idea that your readers may resist—calls for a different start-up strategy.

- ☐ Use a brainstorming outline

Not the best choice. Using a brainstorming outline would be a better start-up strategy if you were writing with a group and wanted to inspire creativity. The writing challenge you're facing in this case—presenting an idea that your readers may resist—calls for a different start-up strategy.

- ☐ Try free writing

Not the best choice. Free writing would be a better start-up strategy if you had writer's block. The writing challenge you're facing in this case—presenting an idea that your readers may resist—calls for a different start-up strategy.

As part of the performance evaluation process in her company, Noor's supervisor has asked her to write a few paragraphs describing her strengths and weaknesses. Every time she sits at her keyboard to start writing, she has no idea what to type. Which start-up strategy would be best for her?

- ☐ Anticipate your readers' questions

Not the best choice. Anticipating readers' questions would be a better start-up strategy if Noor was planning to present an idea about which her readers may have serious concerns. The writing challenge she's facing—not knowing what to type—calls for a different start-up strategy.

- ☐ Make a traditional outline

Not the best choice. Making a traditional outline would be a better start-up strategy if Noor needed to cover a complex subject. Noor needs a start-up strategy that will get her ideas flowing freely.

- ☐ Use a brainstorming outline

Not the best choice. Using a brainstorm outline would be more useful if Noor were writing with a group and wanted to stimulate creativity. She needs a different start-up strategy to get her ideas flowing.

- ☐ Try free writing

Correct choice. Free writing is an excellent way to break through writer's block.

Nasser has been asked to write a plan for anticipating and dealing with a range of potential crises in his organization. He has little experience with this kind of writing. Though he knows what kind of information he wants to include in the plan, he's not sure where to begin. What is the best start-up strategy for Nasser?

- ☐ Anticipate readers' questions

Not the best choice. Anticipating readers' questions would be more appropriate if Nasser was proposing an idea about which readers might have serious concerns. He needs a different start-up strategy for the crisis-management plan he's working on.

- ☐ Make a traditional outline

Correct choice. A traditional outline would be especially helpful, because Nasser is covering a complex subject and has little experience writing.

- ☐ Use a brainstorming outline

Not the best choice. A brainstorming outline would more appropriate if Nasser were writing in a group. To begin drafting the crisis-management plan, he'll need a different start-up strategy.

- ☐ Try free writing

Not the best choice. Free writing would be a better strategy if Nasser had no idea of what information he wanted to include in the plan. In this case, he'll need a different start-up strategy.

Sharon is on a small committee that is drafting recommendations for training new employees. The committee has gathered information and is ready to begin writing. Which start-up strategy should Sharon suggest?

- ☐ Anticipate readers' questions

Not the best choice. Since Sharon isn't anticipating serious objections to the training recommendations, anticipating readers' questions wouldn't be the most helpful strategy. She needs a different start-up strategy in her case.

- ☐ Make a traditional outline

Not the best choice. A traditional outline would be more useful if Sharon was trying to cover a complex subject. In her case, she'll need a different start-up strategy.

- ☐ Use a brainstorming outline

Correct choice. The brainstorm outline is the best start-up strategy to use when you're writing with a group.

- ☐ Try free writing

Not the best choice. Free writing would be more useful if Sharon was experiencing writer's block. To begin writing the training recommendations, she and her committee

would probably want to use a different start-up strategy.

Choose an organizing method

By choosing the most appropriate organizing method, you can make your message clearer to your reader. Here are some common organizing methods and the types of written pieces for which they may be appropriate.

If you're writing:	Consider using this organizing method:	By:
Any type of internal document intended for particularly busy readers	Order of importance	Putting the most critical information at the beginning of your document
A document that traces a series of events	Chronological	Listing events in the order in which they occurred
Instructions or user manuals	Process and procedure	Describing who does what and when
Trip reports, descriptions of machinery, and	Spatial arrangement	Describing one aspect of your topic at a time

research reports		
Feasibility studies, research results, and planning reports	Compare and contrast	Evaluating the advantages and disadvantages of two possibilities
Work orders, training materials, and customer service letters	Specific-to-general or general-to-specific	Starting with a specific or general concept your readers are already familiar with and then moving to a specific or general concept that's new to them
Technical reports, annual reports, and financial analyses	Analytical	Formulating a hypothesis and testing it through questioning

Order of importance

Writers often use a "bottom line on top" (BLOT) approach for many internal documents. When you put the most critical information at the beginning of a document, you are helping busy readers see your most important message quickly.

Chronological

The chronological method of development describes a topic by listing events in the order in which they occurred. It is useful for content that includes information such as the history of a product's development.

When using this method:

- Stick to major, consequential facts.

- Use visual design to highlight important information, such as your key message, which may get lost in this method of development.
- Avoid beginning each sentence with a date if there are more than five dates.

Process and procedure

The process and procedure methods are both useful for instructions and user manuals.

A **process** describes, in overview terms, who does what and what happens (or will happen) *in stages*. Since these stages occur independently of the reader, use the third person to describe them.

For example: "An invoice goes first to the department that incurred the expense for approval, then it moves to accounting for payment."

A **procedure** provides action steps that the reader can actually *do*, in the order needed to accomplish the goal. Since a procedure is an arranged set of steps, present it in the same way you would a recipe or instructions for installing software. Use the second person when describing steps, and begin each step with an action verb.

For example, "Date stamp the invoice," or "Tear off the pink copy for your departmental records."

When using either of these methods:

- Put formal procedures in a table and number each step.
- Present the stages or steps in a process or procedure in the precise order in which they occur.

Spatial arrangement

This spatial arrangement method is useful for trip reports, descriptions of machinery, and sales research reports. Think of it as a two- or three-dimensional map that helps your readers understand your message by taking them on a journey through your topic.

For example, to explain a company's sales territory plan you might first describe opportunities in Los Angeles, then new customers in Newark, and finally government prospects in Washington, D.C.

When using this method:

- Create a coherent and concrete order that's easy to follow, such as left to right, top to bottom, or exterior to interior.
- Use detail to create a visual image for your readers as you move them from space to space.
- Make a conscious effort to engage your readers by varying sentences and substituting new phrases for overused ones.

Compare and contrast

The compare and contrast method demonstrates how concepts are similar or different. It works well for feasibility studies, research results, and planning reports. It is especially effective when you want to evaluate the advantages and disadvantages of two possibilities.

For example, to make a recommendation for a new downtown office location after studying two possibilities, you could present your findings in this sequence:

- Advantages—Site A and Site B
- Disadvantages—Site A and Site B

Specific-to-general or general-to-specific

The specific-to-general or general-to-specific method is useful for work orders, training materials, and customer service letters. The key question to ask yourself when using either of these approaches is: "How much does my reader already know?" Once you've answered the question, begin your document with information familiar to the reader.

For example, when announcing a requirement that all department heads revise their monthly budgets, use a specific-to-general method of developing the memo you will send to the accounting department. Since the accounting team initiated the requirement, structure their communication by first restating the details of the revisions they requested and then address the effect of the revisions company-wide more broadly. For all other departments, draft individual memos that move from a top-level description of the requirement to the specific changes each group must implement to provide a revised budget. Be sure to explain key terms that may be unfamiliar along the way.

When using this method:

- Determine how much your reader already knows about the subject.
- Begin your document with information familiar to your reader.
- Move from specific to general for readers familiar with your topic.
- Move from general to specific for readers not familiar with your topic.
- Place your key message on top whenever possible.

Analytical

To use the analytical method, start by formulating a hypothesis and then rigorously test its truth through a questioning process. This method is useful for technical reports, annual reports, and financial analyses.

When using this method:

- Be sure to include every aspect of your hypothesis to avoid being discredited—or worse, making a bad business decision.
- Analyze your data for similarities, differences, logical links, implications, and suggested actions.
- Simplify technical language for the nontechnical reader, especially when writing a company report intended for the general public.

Activity: Organize this

For each writing project you undertake, you'll need to choose the most appropriate organizing method.

Elizabeth needs to write a formal complaint tracing a series of conversations and actions. Which method should she use to organize this document?

- ☐ Analytical

Not the best choice. The analytical organizing method would be more appropriate if Elizabeth were writing a technical report, annual report, or financial analysis.

- ☐ Chronological

Correct choice. Elizabeth's formal complaint will trace a series of events that occurred in a particular sequence, so it should be organized chronologically.

- ☐ Process and procedure

Not the best choice. The process and procedure organizing method would be better if Elizabeth were writing instructions or a user manual.

Miles must prepare a letter explaining how to use a new service. This letter will be delivered to all of his company's active customers. Which method should he use to organize the letter?

- ☐ Spatial arrangement

Not the best choice. The spatial arrangement organizing method would be a better option if Miles were writing a trip report, description of a piece of equipment, or a research report.

- ☐ Compare and contrast

Not the best choice. The compare and contrast organizing method would make more sense if Miles were writing a feasibility study, research results, or a planning report.

- ☐ Specific-to-general or general-to-specific

Correct choice. Miles can use the general-to-specific method to present his readers with a broad overview of the new service and to provide instructions for using the service.

Yasmin has been asked to write a report on her group's recent study for the executive team. Which method should she use to organize this document?

- ☐ Order of importance

Correct choice. Yasmin's readers are busy executives. The order of importance organizing method would enable them to read the most crucial information first in the report.

- ☐ Chronological

Not the best choice. The chronological organizing method would be a more appropriate choice if Yasmin were writing a document tracing a series of events.

- ☐ Process and procedure

Not the best choice. The process and procedure organizing method would be the better choice if Yasmin were writing instructions or a user manual.

Key Idea: Get it down in rough form

Key Idea

When you sit down to write your first draft, remember: It's more important to get it written than to get every detail right! The first draft can be rough in sentence structure, spelling, grammar, and punctuation. It's for your eyes only.

Getting it down in rough form has two benefits. First, it gets your mind focused on the key ideas you will want to include in your document. Second, since you will have only a small investment in a rough draft, you will likely feel more comfortable changing the order of your material—or even discarding it altogether.

Writing a first draft? Turn off your internal editor.

Begin where you feel most comfortable

“To write simply is as difficult as to be good.”
–W. Somerset Maugham

There's no rule that says you must start at the very beginning. Keep your outline or plan in front of you, and use it to decide where you feel most comfortable starting to write. Most experienced writers save the introductory material until the end; it is often easier to compose an engaging opening paragraph once you know what your conclusions are.

Choose a headline, for example, and write a paragraph for it. When you've finished that, choose the next item you're comfortable writing, and so on. Stop periodically to compare your draft to your plan.

Write in "categories"

The task of writing an important letter can seem daunting when you don't have a method of breaking it down into manageable parts. Your writing is sure to improve if you look at it as a series of smaller tasks. The table shows the categories that frequently appear in several types of documents.

Business letters, memos, and e-mail	Formal proposals
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Announcement of a change 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Title page Table of contents Executive summary

- | | |
|--|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Background information • Implementation plan • Deadline • Explanation of a process • Results • Conclusions • Recommendations • Observations • Proposed actions • Request for action • Evaluation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduction • Statement of customer needs • Proposed procedures (or technical plan) • Benefits of the plan • Impact of the plan • Implementation plan • Qualifications • Cost analysis (or your investment) • Statement of agreement • Appendix |
|--|---|

Special considerations for a technical document

When writing a technical document for a nontechnical audience, spend extra time analyzing your audience. Be sure that you can accurately answer the question, "How much does the audience already understand about this topic?"

One method that has proved helpful for many writers is using two columns. In one column, write the information for a technical reader. In the other, simplify and condense the information for the nontechnical reader.

Focus your paragraphs



Paragraphs are the essential building blocks of any document. They reveal the train of thought in your written piece, thus helping readers understand your message. An effective paragraph has the following characteristics:

- It focuses on one thought, or topic. That is, it presents a topic (often in the first sentence), and then the rest of the sentences in the paragraph relate to that topic.
- It runs no longer than 6 or so lines of text.
- It contains sentences that vary in structure and length.
- It relates to the purpose of your written piece.

For example, here's one paragraph from a report on the use of executive coaching in organizations. Note how the paragraph exhibits all the characteristics listed above.

Many companies use coaching to improve executives' performance. According to one recent survey, up to 40%-50% of Fortune 500 firms offer coaching to their executives through internal programs or services provided by outside coaches. Coaching's popularity is also rising rapidly. In one survey of human resource professionals from 200 companies from North America and Europe, 57% of the respondents stated that use of coaching has increased in their organization over the previous year.

Create smooth transitions

“ I have rewritten—often several times—every word I have ever written. My pencils out last their erasers. ”
—Vladimir Nabokov

As you construct your paragraphs, think about how each one fits into the larger document. Smooth transitions between paragraphs and between sentences within paragraphs can help readers see the linkage between your ideas and the development of your argument.

Consider the following paragraphs. The transitional sentence is shown in italics:

Proponents of expanding restaurant seating have failed to provide any estimates of construction, operating costs, and taxes. Without those estimates, any attempt to evaluate their proposal will be a waste of time.

Even if construction costs were reasonable and manageable for the operation, we would still be facing a high level of revenue uncertainty. No one knows how a doubling of seating will affect annual revenues. Is it reasonable to assume that revenues will double, or is a 75% increase a more likely figure?

Each of the above paragraphs focuses on a different topic: the cost of expanding an existing restaurant (in the first paragraph), and how revenues might grow if such expansion were made (the second paragraph). The transition statement provides readers with a smooth path between the two topics.

Between sentences in a paragraph, words or phrases can provide further smooth transitions. Consider the following example of a transition (in italics) between two sentences within a paragraph:

Our inventory managers have kept a tight lid on stocks or finished goods. *Consequently*, working capital requirements have dropped by eight percent.

In this case, the term, *consequently*, establishes a causal relationship between the two sentences. Other useful transitional language includes: *as a result*, *in addition*, *likewise*, *meanwhile*, *for example*, *finally*, *on the other hand*, *furthermore*, and *nevertheless*.

Activity: Evaluating paragraphs

Are these paragraphs focused and easy to read?

Read the following paragraph and note its strengths and weaknesses:

(1) Companies that conduct market research have an inherent advantage. (2) They are forward-thinking. (3) Such companies have enough available information to decide which market sector(s) to target with their products. (4) They may launch product lines, innovations, and marketing campaigns accordingly. (5) Their success is measured by the frequency with which they publish their findings. (6) Other factors crucial to success include the soundness of their strategy and the agility with which they handle unforeseen obstacles.

What is one of the strengths of the above paragraph?

- ☐ The sentences have varied structures.

Not the best choice. All the sentences in the paragraph start with a subject followed by a verb. This paragraph would be more interesting to read if its sentences started in a variety of ways; for example, with a prepositional phrase (such as "In tough competitive conditions, companies that conduct market research have an inherent advantage").

- ☐ All sentences support the paragraph's topic.

Not the best choice. This is the paragraph's most egregious fault. Sentence 1 suggests that the paragraph topic is about the advantages of market research. But sentences 2, 5, and 6 don't relate to that topic. As a result, the paragraph fails to convey a coherent message.

- ☐ It is not too long.

Correct choice. The paragraph's length would be manageable for readers.

- ☐ There is transitional language.

Not the best choice. This paragraph contains no language easing the transition from sentence to sentence—such as "Companies that conduct market research have an inherent advantage. *By leveraging such research*, they may launch product lines, innovations ..." Without transitional language, the paragraph seems disjointed.

Read the following paragraph and note its strengths and weaknesses:

(1) Online simulations have enormous potential for corporate training. (2) Whereas learners in traditional training environments try to absorb written or spoken facts, simulation participants internalize knowledge by applying new skills in a risk-free environment. (3) In addition, the fun, engaging, and even transformative experiences that simulations create for learners translate into dramatically increased motivation and retention rates for the organization. (4) Thus, simulations provide a high return on training investments.

What is one of the strengths of the above paragraph?

- ☐ Each sentence introduces a new topic.

Not the best choice. Actually, this paragraph is effective because all of its sentences relate to the topic expressed in the first sentence.

- ☐ The paragraph contains transitional language.

Correct choice. The words *In addition* (sentence 3) and *Thus* (sentence 4) help show the linkages between the writer's ideas and help readers transition from one sentence to the

next.

- ☐ The paragraph demonstrates uniform sentence structure and length.

Not the best choice. The sentences show variety in their structure and length, which makes the paragraph more interesting to read.

Key Idea: Keep your message in focus

Key Idea

After writing your first draft, review it to see whether you have set forth all of your key ideas in a logical, focused, and clear manner. Ask yourself whether you've stated your key message clearly. Have you included all of the information that readers will need to understand what they need to do? Is that information accurate?

If you're announcing a deadline or asking readers to take action, use clear labeling so your readers will know what's expected at a glance. Finally, check whether you've created smooth transitions between the parts of your argument.

If you find your document to be deficient in any of these areas, edit what you've written to address these shortfalls.

Does your draft convey the information your readers need to take action?

Sequence your key message strategically

Another element to watch for in your draft is the location of your key message. What is the one thing you want your reader to remember? In most cases, you want to position this information at the top of your document. When the key message is buried, it is likely that your reader may skim right over it.

If you've determined that your reader will probably be unreceptive to your ideas, position your key message strategically—where it will have the best chance of being read and considered. You may find it makes more sense to build a context for your key message before introducing it.

Answer your readers' question: "Why?"

Your document should state not only your key message, but should also explain to the reader why it is important.

For example, if your key message is that you need more time to complete work on a project, don't just stop once you've explained your need. Answer the "Why?" question by including the following:

- What will happen if you don't get the extra time
- Who your extension will affect
- How an extension will impact other projects you're working on
- How your reader(s) will be affected

When writing your document, be sure to include a clear statement of the impact of your key message in terms relevant to your audience.

For example, instead of simply stating: "Option A is better than Option B," write: "Option A is better than Option B because it will save us 30% of our annual overhead costs."

Format your draft for visual impact



Clear, accurate, and consistent writing alone is not enough. A reader needs to be able to glance at your document and find the key ideas without searching through a lot of dense prose. When a document is easy to read and key points jump out, it has visual impact.

Take the time to create a visual structure that entices your audience. Using visual enhancements can make a message stand out from the hundreds that regularly bombard readers. But be careful when using e-mail or any electronic document, as your reader may not have the formatting capabilities or programs required to open your document in the format in which you composed it, or even open it at all.

The following are examples of visual enhancements:

- Headlines that highlight your most important points
- Sentences that are no more than 20 words long
- Short paragraphs and groups of sentences—5 to 6 lines maximum
- Adequate white space
- Bold and italic typeface that make important information stand out
- Bullets or numbers for lists, even those within sentences
- Tables to organize information into groups

Key Idea: Match your tone to your audience

Key Idea

The tone of your writing should be appropriate for your readers.

For example, an informal, casual, or playful tone may be acceptable for a colleague you know well, but it may not be appropriate for a client or a supervisor.

An edgy or provocative tone might work well in an opinion article written for a company's internal newsletter, but it may not be right for the company's annual report.

Tone derives from the words and sentence structure you use. While writing in a formal, professional tone, use the third person and express all ideas in complete sentences. Here's an example:

Many companies use coaching to improve executives' performance.

When used appropriately, an informal, playful tone can foster a sense of rapport with your readers. To achieve this tone, you can use incomplete sentences, contractions, and the second person. Here's one example:

Counting on coaching to maximize your top leaders' performance? If so, you're not alone.

Will the tone of your document please your readers—or offend them?

Leadership Insight: Find your voice

I think one of the hardest parts about any writing assignment, especially a high-stakes writing assignment, is that people kind of freeze up. They don't want to have their natural voice come through because they want to sound way better than themselves, right?

I think a high-stakes assignment that everyone probably has gone through is the college essay. I was no different. I'm a writer now, but at the time I was 18, I was scared, and I revised and wrote this essay. I spent hours on it. By the end of the day it was so stiff and formal and inauthentic and didn't sound like me, that I don't think my own parents could have picked it out of a pile of college essays.

Unfortunately, I think partially as a result of a bad essay, I didn't get into the college of my choice. But I did end up transferring and getting a second chance to write the essay again. I think the second time I made sure that it sounded like me.

I think it's important to get that authentic voice in there in the first draft. Because you can always revise something and make it sound more formal later, but it's really hard to revise something to sound more like you.

I think even in a professional context, I'm glad I learned that lesson early. Even in business now, as a journalist, the one thing that no one else can bring to the table is my voice.

Have confidence in yourself and your message and be authentic in your writing.

Sarah Green
Assistant Editor, Harvard Business Review

Sarah Green is an Assistant Editor at Harvard Business Review. In addition to writing and editing material for HBR.org and the print magazine, she manages the Harvard Business IdeaCast, which is the top-ranked management podcast on iTunes.

Separately, she writes a weekly column for the Boston Metro newspaper; her byline has also appeared in the Boston Globe and the Boston Phoenix. She formerly worked as a researcher for Pulitzer Prize-winning columnist Ellen Goodman.

Sarah received her Bachelor of Arts in English literature from Brown University.

Check for conciseness

“The most valuable of talents is never using two words when one will do.”
—Thomas Jefferson

Many writers use long, complicated words, phrases, or sentences in the mistaken belief that these will make them sound more intelligent or informed. But clarity and simplicity—not overblown language—will better help you accomplish your objective.

For example, instead of writing:

"We will convene an advance planning meeting, brief in duration, to consolidate together the work assigned to Nancy's committee before they forge onward."

Write:

"We will meet briefly to consolidate Nancy's committee's work before the group continues."

As you edit your first draft for conciseness, ask yourself these questions:

- Have I limited my paragraphs to 6 lines?
- Did I focus each of my paragraphs on one thought only?
- Have I kept my sentences to no more than 15 to 20 words?
- Did I eliminate unnecessary words?

If you answer "No" to any of these questions, edit to make your draft concise.

Use the active voice

Consider the following sentence:

The phone call was made by the customer.

What's wrong with it? It's written in the passive voice—a grammatical construction that doesn't exert much impact. A sentence with more impact would read:

The customer made the phone call.

Notice how this second sentence has an active participant doing something. Usually, you can detect a passive sentence by considering its verb: passive sentences always contain some form of the verb "to be" plus another verb. For example,

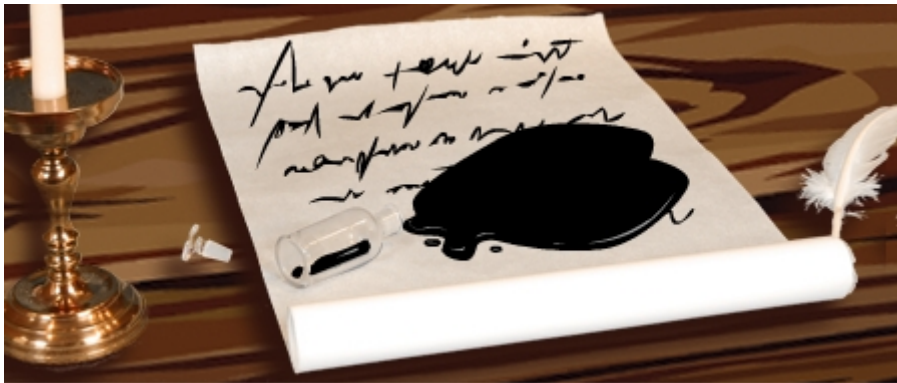
The meeting is held in the large conference room.

Edit for accuracy



An accurate document uses correct grammar, punctuation, and spelling. Avoid relying solely on your computer's spell-check feature—it won't catch mistakes like using *their* in the place of *there* or *affect* for *effect*. Ask a coworker whose writing you admire to check vital documents.

Understand common problems



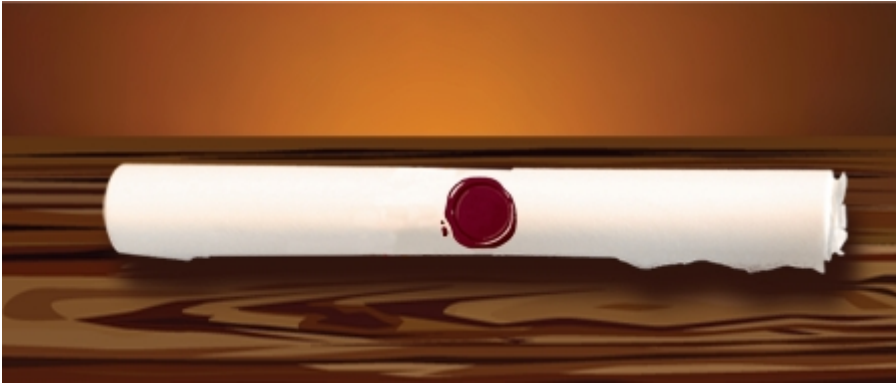
It's so easy to send an e-mail that, at times, it doesn't seem like writing at all. But e-mail is a form of correspondence that requires the same kind of attention that business letters, memos, and reports receive.

In many companies, e-mail is the dominant method of communication because it's fast, easy, and inexpensive. Unfortunately, the speed and ease of e-mail have also created some problems for business writers and their companies, such as:

- Employees send and receive time-wasting, unnecessary messages.
- Many e-mails are poorly and hastily written.
- Writers sometimes send messages that are emotional or inappropriate for a business setting.
- Messages are occasionally misdirected or forwarded to unintended recipients—sometimes with negative consequences.
- E-mails are often read too quickly so recipients miss important details.

These problems can often be avoided by using common sense and some sound writing principles.

Start with the subject line



The subject line is the headline for your message, the lure that gets your reader interested and involved. Take the time to write a subject line that:

- Contains the key message (e.g., "Sales meeting rescheduled to 3 p.m. on Friday")
- Includes your desired action/response (e.g., "Comments needed by 4 p.m. today")
- Is specific but not too long (e.g., "Lunch tomorrow?")
- Allows your reader to file and retrieve your message easily (e.g., "John's global enterprise report")

If your subject line is too general or vague, the reader may skip over it. If the subject line is blank, the reader may delete it. Remember: Busy people often receive 50 to 100 e-mail messages per day. To ensure that yours is opened and read, it should stand out.

Leadership Insight: High impact e-mail

Writing is a major leadership tool. Let's face it, we write more than we meet these days, and we hardly see each other live at all in large corporations. Leaders who can write action-driving documents gain credibility and lots of followers.

I was recently coaching a young woman named Karen. She had just been promoted to a job in a high-tech consulting company and she had a new virtual team to manage, her first. She was a little nervous, so I said, "What are your concerns?" She said, "I'm worried about how I can actually gain credibility quickly when I'm not going to be meeting my people. Writing is going to be my tool."

I said, "Would you like to know the two biggest mistakes people make in e-mail? Maybe that would help." She said, "Sure thing." So I said, "Number one, I get complaints all the time from people deluged with e-mail. They say, 'I don't know what these are about. I open them and I can't tell what it's about.'" So I said, "If you can just help people figure out what your e-mail is about, you'll be ahead of the pack."

"The way to do it is to use a great subject line that's very specific and that says exactly what your content is. You can also start with your purpose. That helps. The second big mistake I hear about has to do with what do you want me to do. And people say, 'If I can't figure out what they

want me to do I put it aside, and later on I might get back to it after I get a hundred more e-mails."

So I said, "The way to avoid that, Karen, is to use a headline that says 'Action requested,' or you can say, 'Suggested next steps,' and you can even have a headline that says 'Deadline.' "With those, people know what you're looking for."

Karen agreed that she would try it. She came back a few months later with a smile and said, "Things are going pretty well. My manager got a compliment from my customers about my communication style and my people are actually copying some of my techniques." She was quite pleased.

Writing can be a powerful tool for you. Think about e-mail, think about what you want people to do. Be clear with your purpose and your actions requested.

When you're managing people you don't see face to face, writing is your tool for establishing leadership and credibility.

Deborah Dumaine

President and Founder, Better Communications

Deborah Dumaine is the President and Founder of Better Communications, a global learning and consulting firm dedicated to helping organizations become more productive and profitable through improved writing.

Deborah is a pioneer in improving business writing quality and strategy, with an emphasis on e-mail. Her process, The Six Steps to Reader-Centered Writing, has is a contributing force behind the brand success of many global companies.

She founded Better Communications in 1978 and since then has been developing writing-improvement techniques and learning solutions in response to the needs of anyone who writes at work.

Deborah is the author of "Write to the Top: Writing for Corporate Success" and the "Instant-Answer Guide to Business Writing." Deborah is a frequent contributor to publications such as Fast Company, Selling Power, Fortune, and American Way.

She received her graduate and undergraduate degrees from Smith College.

Cover one topic per e-mail

Treat each e-mail as a coherent information packet—to ask a question, communicate your opinion, report news, etc. To achieve coherence, limit each e-mail to only one message. This approach has two major advantages:

- Recipients can digest and respond to a single message more easily.
- It enables the recipient to forward the message to another party without dragging along other messages—which may be highly inappropriate for that audience.

In addition to covering only one topic in each e-mail, convey your purpose to the reader immediately—in the subject line and at the start of the message. Let your reader know whether it's a call to action, a request for information, a passing on of information, or a recommendation.

Be concise and use attachments

Long e-mail messages require lots of annoying on-screen scrolling by the recipient. So keep your messages short. When you have a lengthy message to send, send it as an attachment instead of as e-mail text. Use the e-mail message to inform the reader what the attachment is and what the reader should do with it.

Remember your audience

When writing to your peers and friends, you can be as informal as you want. When writing to a superior or client, make your e-mail look like a brief professional memo. Adapt your tone and language to the reader.

Keep your formatting simple

In the e-mail environment, you can't control how a message will appear on the recipient's screen, so don't expect fancy formatting to be maintained in the transfer. For headlines or emphasis, capitalize all letters (however, don't send your entire message in all caps—that's considered shouting). Use white space to help the reader grasp the message quickly—too much text bunched together becomes difficult to read.

Review your company's e-mail policy

Despite its great convenience for businesses, e-mail may make a company vulnerable to lawsuits for harassment and libel. As a result, many companies have a policy that clearly outlines how e-mail should be used at work. Find out if your company has such a policy, so that you can be sure to comply with it.

Know when not to send an e-mail

E-mail may be the preferred form of communication in many organizations today, but it's not always the most effective or appropriate method. In addition to being consistent with your company's e-mail policies, consider the following suggestions:

- Avoid sending private messages via e-mail. Call or meet the person for personal or confidential exchanges.
- Arrange a face-to-face meeting when e-mail messages don't seem to be working effectively. If you keep sending messages back and forth without reaching a resolution, whether over a period of hours or a number of weeks, pick up the telephone and make an appointment to meet. A general guideline is to limit your e-mail exchanges to no more than four.
- Delete mass mailings; don't forward them.

Be particularly careful when expressing emotion in e-mail. Humor can be misunderstood, criticism may be misinterpreted, and angry feelings can be further inflamed. If you are unsure whether your intention

will be understood, reconsider sending the message. A face-to-face meeting or phone call may be a better choice.

Activity: Using e-mail appropriately

Can you distinguish between appropriate and inappropriate uses of e-mail?

Pashad has received an e-mail from an employee raising concerns about a new policy. He knows that the rest of his team may have the same concerns, so he forwards the e-mail and his response to the rest of the team.

Is this an appropriate or inappropriate use of e-mail?

☐ Appropriate

Not the best choice. This employee did not intend for anyone else to read the email, so Pashad should not have forwarded it to the rest of his team.

☐ Inappropriate

Correct choice. This employee did not intend for anyone else to read the email, so Pashad should not have forwarded it to the rest of his team.

Xiomara wants to address an employee's disruptive behavior in the office. She drafts an e-mail to the person that documents the specific incidents in which the employee violated company policies and that explains the consequences of any further infractions.

Is this an appropriate or inappropriate use of e-mail?

☐ Appropriate

Not the best choice. Problematic behavior is best addressed initially through face-to-face meetings, not e-mail. However, after a face-to-face meeting, it may be appropriate for Xiomara to send the employee an e-mail to recap and document the conversation.

☐ Inappropriate

Correct choice. Problematic behavior is best addressed initially through face-to-face meetings, not e-mail. However, after a face-to-face meeting, it may be appropriate for Xiomara to send the employee an e-mail to recap and document the conversation.

Garrett's colleague, Mae, has offered to review a report that Garrett is working on. Garrett drafts a short e-mail to Mae with the report attached.

Is this an appropriate or inappropriate use of e-mail?

☐ Appropriate

Correct choice. Garrett will help Mae manage her time and stay organized by keeping his e-mail concise and attaching the report.

☐ Inappropriate

Not the best choice. Garrett will help Mae manage her time and stay organized by keeping his e-mail concise and attaching the report.

Clark and Amira have exchanged e-mail four times over the past few days while trying to agree on the specifications for a new product. Since Clark was the last one to send an e-mail, Amira sits down to draft a response.

Is this an appropriate or inappropriate use of e-mail?

☐ Appropriate

Not the best choice. It's time for Clark and Amira to arrange a face-to-face meeting. They have already exchanged several messages and are clearly having trouble reaching an agreement via e-mail.

☐ Inappropriate

Correct choice. It's time for Clark and Amira to arrange a face-to-face meeting. They have already exchanged several messages and are clearly having trouble reaching an agreement via e-mail.

Eustace received a stock tip through e-mail at the office. He forwards the tip to his fellow team members.

Is this an appropriate or inappropriate use of e-mail?

☐ Appropriate

Not the best choice. Eustace should delete mass-mailings. If he forwards this message to others, he risks wasting their time and possibly violating company policies prohibiting use of e-mail for personal purposes.

☐ Inappropriate

Correct choice. Eustace should delete mass-mailings. If he forwards this message to others, he risks wasting their time and possibly violating company policies prohibiting use of e-mail for personal purposes.

Cynthia plans to write a quick e-mail to Brad, one of her employees, to approve his vacation request.

Is this an appropriate or inappropriate use of e-mail?

☐ Appropriate

Correct choice. In this situation, Cynthia can quickly communicate a simple fact, so e-mail is the ideal tool.

☐ Inappropriate

Not the best choice. In this situation, Cynthia can quickly communicate a simple fact, so e-mail is the ideal tool.

Overview

This section provides interactive exercises so you can practice what you've learned. These exercises are self-checks only; your answers will not be used to evaluate your performance in the topic.

Scenario

Assume the role of a manager in a fictional situation and explore different outcomes based on your choices (5-10 minutes).

Check Your Knowledge

Assess your understanding of key points by completing a 10-question quiz (10 minutes).

Scenario: Part 1

Part 1

Jorge is a new research manager for EEI, Inc., which conducts environmental impact studies for companies that are considering building new factories. He has just finished a major project—evaluating two potential factory sites under consideration by PrimeCo, a new EEI customer.

PrimeCo is already familiar with "Bridgton," one of the proposed sites, since it's close to PrimeCo's headquarters. The other site, "Bayview," is some distance from the headquarters. After analyzing the sites, Jorge concludes that Bayview is the better site.

Next Jorge needs to prepare a report for PrimeCo presenting his analysis and recommendations. The report is due the following week. Jorge begins by deciding how he wants to organize the document.

Which of these guidelines should Jorge follow as he organizes his report?

- Present the details of his analysis in clearly focused paragraphs, enhanced by charts and tables, and then state his conclusion.

Not the best choice.

In most written business communications, it's better to start off by presenting the information your reader will want to know right away. In this case, PrimeCo is likely most eager to learn which of the two possible factory sites Jorge recommends. Once PrimeCo knows Jorge's recommendation, it can take a closer look at the details that led him to his conclusion. By using this structure, you write from your *reader's* point of view—something you should strive for in all business communications.

- In the section comparing the two sites in detail, start with information about Bridgton, and then provide details about Bayview.

Correct choice.

Whenever you compare two subjects in an analytical report, memo, or other form of written communication, it's best to *first* mention the subject that is most familiar to your reader. This approach helps your reader make the transition from the familiar to the unfamiliar, which in turn makes it easier for him or her to absorb the detailed information you're providing. This is another example of how to write from your reader's point of view.

- Capture his reader's attention by beginning the report with an engaging graphic or surprising statistic relating to PrimeCo's industry.

Not the best choice.

Though this approach would be effective in other kinds of publications, such as a news magazine or an informal newsletter, it is not appropriate for a more formal comparison study like Jorge's. Be careful when considering striking an informal or even a humorous note in a written business communication. Often, informality or humor is appropriate only if you know your reader well. With outside clients and superiors, it's safer to avoid both.

Scenario: Part 2

Part 2

Jorge decides to organize the PrimeCo report by stating his recommendation first, by starting his comparative analysis with information about the familiar Bridgton site, and by using a formal, professional tone throughout.

In considering all the information he needs to include in his report, along with his many other projects, Jorge realizes he won't be able to complete the PrimeCo document by the following week. He decides he needs an extension.

As he's mulling over his situation, he gets an e-mail from Mia, his supervisor. She's asking Jorge for an update on the status of the PrimeCo project—no later than four o'clock that day.

Jorge decides to broach the subject of the extension in the memo—but is unsure just how to frame the request.

How should Jorge ask for an extension in his memo to Mia?

- Explain the cause of the delay on the PrimeCo report, list all his other pressing projects—then suggest several solutions, including an extension.

Not the best choice.

In this case, Mia has asked for a memo specifically updating her on the PrimeCo project. Jorge shouldn't include additional information, such as a list of his other projects or numerous potential solutions to his problem. Many writers get caught up in their own agendas when preparing a communication, rather than writing from their reader's point of view. Jorge's memo should provide the information Mia asked for and then deliver one focused message—that he needs an extension and the implications of that extension.

- Explain what he has accomplished to date on the PrimeCo project, and then request more time to submit the written documentation.

Not the best choice.

This approach doesn't provide an answer to the key question: "Why?" or, in other words, "What are the implications of what I'm proposing?" To communicate effectively, Jorge should follow his request for an extension with an explanation of what will happen if Mia doesn't grant it. For example, he should detail exactly how his other projects will be affected if he does not get an extension.

- Provide the requested update, explain the need for an extension, and then note any impact an extension will have.

Correct choice.

An effective business communication doesn't stop after delivering its message—it also answers the question "Why?" or "What are the implications of what I'm proposing?" Many writers forget or neglect to address this. To make sure you've covered these questions, always go back over your first draft and ask yourself: "Did I write from my reader's point of view?" and "What are the possible consequences of what I'm proposing?" Then make any necessary edits.

Scenario: Part 3

Part 3

At 3:45 that day, Jorge gives Mia his memo explaining the status of the PrimeCo project and asking for an extension. She reads it, considers the various ramifications, and decides that a one-week extension would be acceptable in this case. Then she suggests that Jorge call Toni, EEI's contact at PrimeCo, to inform her of the change.

Jorge happens to know that Toni is traveling, but that she does check her e-mail. So, he decides to update Toni by e-mail rather than phone.

He sits down at his computer and thinks about what elements he'll need to include in his message.

Which of these guidelines should Jorge follow as he writes his e-mail to Toni?

- To communicate his sincere regret about the delay, start his message with a heartfelt apology for needing more time to submit the report.

Not the best choice.

Jorge should take care not to come across as overly emotional about his regret in the e-mail. Generally speaking, e-mails that contain emotional messages should be sent with extreme caution, since they can be easily misread by their recipients.

For example, readers may misunderstand humor and take offense, misinterpret criticism as harsher than the writer intended, or respond to anger with even more intense negative emotion. In this case, Toni might conclude that Jorge is overly upset and perhaps worried—and might begin to wonder if the project is in worse shape than it really is.

- To convey progress, start by summarizing the steps he's taken so far, then inform Toni of the extension, and finally, reassure Toni by explaining how he will avoid any further delays.

Not the best choice.

This e-mail message is too cluttered. With e-mail, as with most other forms of written business communication, it's better to cover just one topic per message. This has become especially important as e-mail has proliferated in the business world. By covering just one topic, you keep your messages as concise and focused as possible—which readers who receive numerous e-mails greatly appreciate.

- To help Toni retrieve the message quickly and easily, include a subject line stating the new date, then explain in the e-mail body the reasons for, and benefits of, the extension.

Correct choice.

With any e-mail message, the subject line is the headline for your message—a powerful tool for getting your reader quickly involved in what you have to say. Your subject line should: (1) contain your key message, (2) include any desired action or response, (3) be specific but concise, and (4) enable your reader to file and retrieve your message easily.

In Jorge's case, an effective subject line might read something like: "Submission Date for Site Report Changed to June 4." Then, in the body of his message, Jorge could explain why the deadline has slipped, offer a brief (but not emotional) apology, and show how the new deadline might benefit Toni (for example, resulting in a more thorough report). All these elements further help Jorge write from his reader's point of view and address his reader's needs.

Scenario: Conclusion

Conclusion

Jorge includes an informative subject line and keeps his e-mail to Toni short and focused on Toni's needs.

The next day, Toni thanks Jorge for the concise update and urges him to meet the new deadline.

Writing for business—whether it's a report, memo, or e-mail message—can be challenging for busy managers. To communicate as effectively as possible, put some thought into how you might best organize your written piece so that it addresses your reader's—not your—needs. Also, always explain the ramifications of your message—answering the question "So what?" Finally, take care when sending e-mail messages:

This form of business correspondence has unique advantages and disadvantages, and requires just as much attention as hard-copy correspondence.

Activity: Check Your Knowledge: Question 1

Which of the following purposes would be *best* served by a broadly-scoped report?

- Communicating the findings of a task force on pricing to your company's top management

Not the best choice.

For this purpose, you would require a more narrowly scoped report focusing on the specific findings of the task force, not a broadly scoped report. Your purpose for writing and your audience should drive the scope of your written piece.

The correct answer is "Informing a newly formed task force about pricing issues facing your company." In this case, your purpose is to get readers up to speed on the issue. Your audience would want to know as much as possible about the subject, since the task force will be reviewing the issue in detail. A broadly scoped report would provide your readers with the background they need to carry out their responsibilities.

- [Informing a newly formed task force about pricing issues facing your company](#)

Correct choice.

In this case, your purpose is to get readers up to speed on the issue. Your audience would want to know as much as possible about the subject, since the task force will be reviewing the issue in detail. As a writer, you must determine how broad or limited the scope of your document should be, given your purpose and your audience. In this case, a broad scope would provide your readers with the background they need to carry out their responsibilities.

- [Convincing a sales team of the need to create a pricing task force at your company](#)

Not the best choice.

For this purpose, you would require a more narrowly scoped report focusing on why the company needs a pricing task force, not a broadly scoped report. Your purpose for writing and your audience should drive the scope of your written piece.

The correct answer is "Informing a newly formed task force about pricing issues facing your company." In this case, your purpose is to get readers up to speed on the issue. Your audience would want to know as much as possible about the subject, since the task force will be reviewing the issue in detail. A broadly scoped report would provide your readers with the background they need to carry out their responsibilities.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 2

What is meant by the phrase "reader-centered writing"?

- [Writing to the reader as if you were speaking face-to-face](#)

Not the best choice.

Though at times you may want to write as if you were speaking face-to-face to your readers, this isn't the correct definition of "reader-centered writing." Reader-centered writing means considering your readers' needs at every step of the writing process—in other words, writing from the readers' point of view. Imagining that you are the various readers helps you anticipate the kinds of questions they might have about your topic. Thinking from the readers' perspective also helps you avoid the chief complaint business readers have—that they don't know what the writer wants from them.

- **Considering a reader's needs at every step of the writing process**

Correct choice.

Reader-centered writing means considering your readers' needs at every step of the writing process—in other words, writing from the readers' point of view. Imagining that you are the various readers helps you anticipate the kinds of questions they might have about your topic. Thinking from the readers' perspective also helps you avoid the chief complaint business readers have—that they don't know what the writer wants from them.

- **Repeating the purpose of the written piece throughout a document to reinforce that purpose in readers' minds**

Not the best choice.

Though you may want to restate the purpose of the written piece in several places within the document, this isn't the correct definition of "reader-centered writing." Reader-centered writing means considering your readers' needs at every step of the writing process—in other words, writing from the readers' point of view. Imagining that you are the various readers helps you anticipate the kinds of questions they might have about your topic. Thinking from the readers' perspective also helps you avoid the chief complaint business readers have—that they don't know what the writer wants from them.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 3

Which of the following is a recommended strategy for writing a first draft?

- **Start at the beginning of the document and systematically work your way through your outline**

Not the best choice.

Starting at the beginning and systematically working your way through your outline can make writing a first draft seem overwhelming. Instead, break your document into categories and work through each one at your own pace. Your writing is sure to improve when you begin looking at each written piece as a series of smaller, manageable tasks that you can tackle at a pace you feel comfortable with.

- **Break your document into categories and work through each one at your own pace**

Correct choice.

The task of writing an important document can seem daunting when you don't have a method for breaking it down into manageable parts. Your writing is sure to improve when you begin to look at each written piece as a series of smaller tasks that you can tackle at a pace you feel comfortable with.

- **Break your document into sections, and perfect each section before starting to work on the next one**

Not the best choice.

Breaking the document into sections and feeling compelled to perfect each one can make writing a first draft seem overwhelming. Instead, break your document into categories and work through each one at your own pace. Your writing is sure to improve when you begin looking at each written piece as a series of smaller, manageable tasks that you can tackle at a pace you feel comfortable with.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 4

Which of the following statements illustrates a common style error made by many writers?

- "This customer-focused strategy can give us a big lead on the competition."

Not the best choice.

This sentence does not illustrate a common style error. In contrast, the statement, "It is essential that you keep in mind that this solution was designed and developed by the chief engineer" overuses the passive voice—which *is* a common style error. The statement would have more impact if it simply read: "Please note that the chief engineer designed and developed this solution."

- "Developing a stand-alone distribution channel rather than using our existing shipping center could save us up to 30% on our annual costs."

Not the best choice.

This sentence does not illustrate a common style error. In contrast, the statement, "It is essential that you keep in mind that this solution was designed and developed by the chief engineer" overuses the passive voice—which *is* a common style error. The statement would have more impact if it simply read: "Please note that the chief engineer designed and developed this solution."

- "It is essential that you keep in mind that this solution was designed and developed by the chief engineer."

Correct choice.

This sentence overuses the passive voice—a common style error. The statement would have more impact if it simply read: "Please note that the chief engineer designed and developed this solution."

Check Your Knowledge: Question 5

Lengthy sentences can be cumbersome or cause your reader to lose the key message. What is a good guideline for sentence length?

- About 15 to 20 words

Correct choice.

It's a good idea to limit sentences to about 15 to 20 words, and paragraphs to about six lines. By reviewing your first draft, you can easily shorten long sentences or break them into two. You can also add white space every five or six lines.

- About 25 to 30 words

Not the best choice.

Sentences of 25 to 30 words are too difficult for readers to scan. The correct choice is "About 15 to 20 words." Limit sentences to about 20 words, and paragraphs to about six lines. By reviewing your first draft, you can easily shorten long sentences or break them into two. You can also add white space every five or six lines.

- 15 words or fewer

Not the best choice.

Sentences of fewer than 15 words may be unnecessarily short. The correct choice is "About 15 to 20 words." Limit sentences to about 20 words, and paragraphs to about six lines. By reviewing your first draft, you can easily shorten long sentences or break them into two. You can also add white space every five or six lines.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 6

Which of the following is *not* a recommended start-up strategy?

- Prepare a traditional outline

Not the best choice.

Preparing a traditional outline actually *is* a recommended start-up strategy. Spending time crafting an excellent first sentence, however, is *not* a recommended strategy, because it's not a good use of your time. Instead, use a strategy that helps you develop a structure for your document. The three recommended start-up strategies in addition to using a traditional outline include: (1) brainstorming an outline, (2) imagining yourself in the reader's shoes and answering the questions you would ask, and (3) free writing.

- Craft an excellent first sentence

Correct choice.

Spending time crafting an excellent first sentence is *not* a recommended strategy. It makes more sense to use a strategy that helps you develop a structure for your document. The four recommended start-up strategies include: (1) using a traditional outline, (2) brainstorming an outline, (3) imagining yourself in the reader's shoes and answering the questions you would ask, and (4) free writing.

- Brainstorm an outline

Not the best choice.

Brainstorming an outline actually *is* a recommended start-up strategy. Spending time crafting an excellent first sentence, however, is *not* a recommended strategy, because it's not a good use of your time. Instead, use a strategy that helps you develop a structure for your document. The three recommended start-up strategies in addition to brainstorming an outline include: (1) using a traditional outline, (2) imagining yourself in the reader's shoes and answering the questions you would ask, and (3) free writing.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 7

Many managers fall into the trap of exchanging endless e-mails with a team member to resolve an issue instead of communicating in person. At what point should you stop e-mailing and start communicating face-to-face, or at least by phone?

- In general, no more than four e-mail exchanges

Correct choice.

If you find you've been e-mailing back and forth with a coworker or team member more than four times, this could be a clue that you're avoiding a resolution or a decision. Discuss the issue in person or on the phone.

- After two e-mail exchanges

Not the best choice.

Exchanging one or two e-mails to resolve an issue is routine and does not suggest the need for face-to-face resolution of an issue. But if you find you've been e-mailing back and forth with a coworker or team member more than four times, this could be a clue that you're avoiding a resolution or a decision. Discuss the issue in person or on the phone.

- If the issue is unresolved in three business days

Not the best choice.

Deciding to stop e-mailing after three days seems arbitrary, since a time span has no bearing on the number of e-mail communications that have occurred. The general guideline is to limit your e-mail exchanges to no more than four. If you find you've been e-mailing back and forth with a coworker or team member more than four times, this could be a clue that you're avoiding a resolution or a decision. Discuss the issue in person or on the phone.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 8

You are preparing to write a paragraph of average length. How many topics should you cover in the paragraph?

- Only one

Correct choice.

A well-written paragraph focuses on one thought, or topic, often expressed in the first sentence. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph should all relate to that topic.

- [More than four](#)

Not the best choice.

A well-written paragraph focuses on only one thought, or topic, often expressed in the first sentence. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph should all relate to that topic.

- [Between two and four](#)

Not the best choice.

A well-written paragraph focuses on only one thought, or topic, often expressed in the first sentence. The rest of the sentences in the paragraph should all relate to that topic.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 9

Your manager has asked you to write a user manual for a new software application installed in your department. Which organizing method would you most likely use to write this manual?

- [Process and procedure](#)

Correct choice.

With a user manual, you need to explain who does what and when. The process and procedure organizing method can help you construct the draft along these lines.

- [Chronological](#)

Not the best choice.

The chronological organizing method is best used for other types of written documents—particularly those tracing a series of events. To write a user manual, you would probably want to select the process and procedure method.

- [Analytical](#)

Not the best choice.

The analytical organizing method is best used for technical reports, annual reports, and financial analyses. To write a user manual, you would probably want to select the process and procedure method.

Check Your Knowledge: Question 10

You're planning a memo asking several team members to stay late for an after-work meeting next week. You know that the majority of the people who will receive this memo won't be happy with your request. You know roughly what you want to say in the memo, but you feel reluctant to start writing. Which strategy would best help you get started?

- Try free writing

Not the best choice.

Free writing would be a better choice of start-up strategy if you had writer's block (or "blank-screen syndrome"). To begin writing a memo asking people to stay late for a meeting, you would likely want to anticipate your readers' questions, and write to address them.

- Anticipate readers' questions

Correct choice.

By anticipating your readers' questions and concerns, you can ensure that your memo tells readers what they need to know—such as "Why do we have to stay late for the meeting?" and "What do I need to do to prepare?"

- Create a traditional outline

Not the best choice.

Creating a traditional outline would be a better choice of start-up strategy if you were an inexperienced writer or if you needed to cover a complex subject. To begin writing a memo asking people to stay late for a meeting, you would likely want to anticipate your readers' questions, and write to address them.

Check Your Knowledge: Results

Your score:

Steps for planning your writing task

1. Clarify your purpose for writing.

Think carefully about what response you would like from your readers. What is your purpose for writing? You may want to:

- Explain
- Inform
- Influence
- Deliver
- Request

Consider making your purpose even more explicit by combining one of the above action verbs with detailed information.

2. Analyze your audience.

Ask yourself the following questions about your audience:

- Will my readers be receptive, indifferent, or resistant to my proposal?
- What do my readers already know about the subject?
- How much technical information do my readers understand?
- What is my readers' style, and how can I match it?
- What's in it for my readers?

3. Isolate and refine your bottom line.

The bottom line is the one key message that you want your readers to remember. The sooner you can distill your key message into one or two sentences, the easier it will be to write your document. If you find that you have two unrelated key messages, write two documents. Stick to one topic per document to get optimal results from your reader.

4. Plan your writing strategy.

As you think about your strategy, ask yourself these questions:

- Am I the right person to communicate this information?
- Do I need to include a separate cover letter with my document?
- Which method of transmission should I use? E-mail? Courier?
- Is the timing too early? Or is it too late to send the message at all?

Steps for editing for content

1. Make sure that your message is audience-focused.

One of the most common mistakes writers make is focusing on their own agendas and failing to address their reader's needs. Review documents closely to ensure that the message you've written incorporates your reader's needs.

2. Review for clarity.

Make your purpose—particularly action steps or deadlines for your reader—easy to find and understand. Also ensure that your writing is precise and that the scope of the content addressed is manageable.

3. Sequence your message strategically.

For receptive readers, put your bottom line or key message at the top of the document. If you think that your reader may be unreceptive to your ideas, position your key message strategically—where it has the best chance of being read and considered. You may find it makes more sense to build a context for our key message before introducing it.

4. Be sure you answer the question, "Why?"

Don't skip this question—it's your key to credibility. Make sure that your document explains exactly why your key message is important in terms that the reader will understand.

Steps for editing for style

1. Design for visual impact.

Take the time to create a visual structure that entices readers. Using visual impact appropriately can make a message stand out from the hundreds that regularly bombard readers.

Help your readers process your document by using headlines, columns, tables, bold and italic typeface, bulleted and numbered lists, and plenty of white space.

2. Match your tone to your audience.

The tone of your writing will impact how your reader views what you have to say. An informal tone may be appropriate for a colleague you know well, but would not be appropriate for a client or a supervisor.

Additionally, the type of language you use to draft your message will impact your readers' understanding. Choose words that will clarify your message—not cloud it.

3. Check for conciseness. State your message briefly but completely.

4. Adopt the active voice.

Whenever possible, use the active voice to create powerful statements that drive action. The key difference between active and passive sentences is that an active sentence has "participant" actively doing something.

For example, instead of writing: "The software was designed by the chief engineer," write: "The chief engineer designed the software."

5. Edit for accuracy. Proofread carefully to make sure your grammar, punctuation, and spelling won't embarrass you.

Tips for using the order of importance method

- When you are writing for two or more readers, consider the probable reaction of the most important reader, usually the decision maker. Organize your document accordingly.
- For receptive readers, put your key message on top.
- For unreceptive or resistant readers, you may need to provide more context and background before stating your key message. Use the beginning of your document to convince your reader that your recommendation is a good one.

Tips for using the compare and contrast method

- When comparing two subjects, mention the more familiar one first.
- Use graphs or charts to compare technical information.
- Avoid mixing statements about advantages and disadvantages in the same section.
- Be coherent in your comparisons by using key phrases, such as: "on one hand" and "on the other hand"; "the former" and "the latter"; and "in the same way" and "in opposition to this."

Tips for writing an e-mail message

- Put the key message in your subject line to ensure that your reader doesn't delete your message.

- Keep your message short. Try to put all the pertinent information on the first screen.
- Cover only one topic per e-mail.
- Edit and spell-check your message before you send it.
- Never send e-mail when you're angry. A good test is to ask yourself if you would make your statement to the person's face. If not, don't send the message electronically.
- When forwarding a message, check the original subject line. Will the new reader understand the topic? If not, revise as needed.
- Include a closing. For external readers, use something simple such as "Sincerely" or "Regards." For internal messages, follow your organization's guidelines.
- Type in the recipient's address just before you click "Send." This reduces the chance that you'll send an unfinished message or a message to the wrong person.
- Send e-mails only to people who need to receive them.

Tips for writing a business memo

- Cover only one topic per memo.
- Write a specific subject line.
- Use clear and specific headlines to highlight deadlines and action requests.
- Cluster related ideas into categories.
- Design your memo for visual impact.
- Use the active voice wherever possible.
- If you know your readers, your tone should be friendlier and less formal than in a business letter.

Tips for writing a business letter

- Begin on a personal note.
- In the first sentence, grab your readers' attention with your key message.
- Keep sentence length to about 20 words.
- Use white space for easier scanning. Keep the length of a paragraph to about 5 to 6 lines.
- Use the active rather than the passive voice.
- Adopt a positive tone. For example, use your investment instead of fees or cost.
- Format your letter for visual impact.
- Toward the end, summarize your main points or suggest next steps for your readers.
- Don't mention enclosures in your opening sentence. If you send enclosures with your letter, mention them later in the body.
- Avoid an overly formal style.
- If appropriate, add a brief note of friendliness or a personal touch in your closing.

Tips for writing a proposal

- Before you begin, ask for a proposal planning session with the recipient in order to learn more about the company's needs.
- Make the focus of your proposal the customer. Tell your readers how your product or service will meet their needs. Don't list all the features of your product or service, but match customer needs with your product's benefits and impact on the customer's business.
- Answer the "Why?" question.
- Be specific—the more concrete your information, the more real and workable your solution appears.

- Design your proposal for visual impact.

Focus sheet™

Focus Sheet™		
Answer these questions as the first step in any writing task.		
Purpose		
Why am I writing this?		
What do I want the reader to do?		
Audience		
Who exactly is my reader(s)? Do I have more than one?		
What is the reader's role(s): Decision-maker? Influencer? Implementer? Other?		
What does the reader know about the subject?		
How will the reader react to my main message: Receptive? Indifferent? Resistant?		
What's in it for the reader? Why should the reader read this or agree with it?		
How will the reader use this document?		
Should anyone else receive this?		
Bottom Line		
If the reader were to forget everything else, what one main message must the reader remember?		
So what? What is the impact of my bottom line?		
Strategy		
Should my message be a document? Or would a phone call be more effective?		
Timing: Am I too early? Or too late to send it at all?		
Distribution list: Trimmed to the minimum?		
Is someone else communicating the same information? Should I check?		
Select method(s) of transmission		
<input type="checkbox"/> E-Mail	<input type="checkbox"/> Internet	<input type="checkbox"/> Postal Delivery
<input type="checkbox"/> Fax	<input type="checkbox"/> a Meeting	<input type="checkbox"/> Courier
<input type="checkbox"/> Internal Mail	<input type="checkbox"/> a Presentation	
<input type="checkbox"/> Intranet (web sites or shared folders)	<input type="checkbox"/> Videoconference	
Other: _____		

Document organizing guide

<i>Document Organizing Guide</i>							
<i>Print out this guide for a quick reference on organizing different sections of your document.</i>							
Type of Document	Method of Organization						
	Order of importance	Chronology	Process	Organization in space	Compare/contrast	Specific to general or vice versa	Analysis
Accident Reports		X					
Analysis of Trends							X
Annual Reports	X						X
Audits	X						X
Customer Service Letters	X					X	
Demographic Studies				X			X
Descriptions			X	X			
Economic Forecasts	X						X
Feasibility Studies					X	X	X
Financial Analyses	X				X		X
Findings	X						
Growth Statistics		X					X
Handbooks			X	X			
Instructions			X	X			
Lab Reports	X	X	X		X		X
Memos	X	X					
Problem-solving Memos	X						X
Procedures/Processes		X	X	X			
Production Reports	X						
Progress Reports	X	X					
Proposals	X				X	X	
Research Results	X				X		
Sales Research Reports	X			X			
Technical Reports			X		X		X
Test Protocols		X					
Training		X	X		X	X	
Trip Reports	X	X		X			
Trouble Reports	X	X					X
User Manuals			X	X			
Work Orders		X			X		
Yearly Overviews	X	X			X		

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Designing for visual impact reference guide

<i>Designing for Visual Impact Reference Guide</i>	
<i>Print this guide for a quick reminder of how to design your document for easy reading.</i>	
You Can Use . . .	To . . .
Headlines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Introduce most paragraphs • Focus your reader on your major ideas
Sidelines	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Add extra emphasis • Aid in persuasion
Text Fonts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Assure readability • Unify style
Short Paragraphs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Avoid overwhelming your reader • Attract speed readers
Two Columns	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Convey two kinds of information simultaneously • Encourage faster reading
Bulleted Lists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Replace lists within sentences
Numbered Lists	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Indicate sequence • List steps in a procedure • Provide easy reference to the list • Quantify items
White Space and Indentation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Frame your ideas • Improve readability
Graphs, Charts, and Tables	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Present numbers, dollar amounts, and technical data
Color (use judiciously)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Highlight information (limit to two colors) • Add aesthetic appeal
<u>underlining</u> – bold typeface – different fonts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Emphasize deadlines and action items
ALL CAPITALS – <i>italics</i> – different type sizes	

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Be your own editor checklist

<i>"Be Your Own Editor" Checklist</i>	
<i>The questions below reflect easy-to-overlook aspects of editing. Before releasing a document, verify for yourself that you have considered each item.</i>	
Content	
Purpose:	<input type="checkbox"/> Stated clearly? <input type="checkbox"/> Specific requests for action or information?
Information:	<input type="checkbox"/> Accurate and complete? <input type="checkbox"/> Right amount of detail?
Sequence	
Bottom Line:	<input type="checkbox"/> At the top? <input type="checkbox"/> Strategically placed?
Organization:	<input type="checkbox"/> Ideas flow logically?
Design	
Format:	<input type="checkbox"/> Enough headlines, sidelines, and lists? <input type="checkbox"/> Deadlines and action items highlighted? <input type="checkbox"/> White space to frame ideas?
Presentation:	<input type="checkbox"/> Would a chart, table, or graph be more effective for certain information?
Structure	
Paragraphs:	<input type="checkbox"/> Begin with a topic sentence? <input type="checkbox"/> Transitions within and between? <input type="checkbox"/> Focused on one topic? <input type="checkbox"/> Limited to 5 to 6 lines?
Sentences:	<input type="checkbox"/> Varied in structure and length? <input type="checkbox"/> Streamlined to 15 to 20 words?
Tone/Style	
Words:	<input type="checkbox"/> Simple, specific, and straightforward? <input type="checkbox"/> Terminology familiar to readers? <input type="checkbox"/> Free of affectation and stuffy outdated language? <input type="checkbox"/> Headlines designed for impact? <input type="checkbox"/> Acronyms explained?
Style:	<input type="checkbox"/> Personable, upbeat, and direct? <input type="checkbox"/> Active voice? <input type="checkbox"/> Appropriate for the audience? <input type="checkbox"/> Positive approach?
Proofread	
<input type="checkbox"/>	Grammar, spelling, and punctuation accurate? <input type="checkbox"/> Should someone else review this?
<input type="checkbox"/>	Typographical errors corrected? <input type="checkbox"/> If this is a repeat mailing, is new data highlighted?
Other <i>Enter your own editorial "trouble spots" to double-check and prevent.</i>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	
<input type="checkbox"/>	

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Why Develop Others?

"At the end of the day, you bet on people, not strategies."

Larry Bossidy

Former CEO, AlliedSignal

In today's global business environment, markets and regulations change quickly. Competitors constantly innovate. Technological changes are the norm.

In order to outmaneuver the competition and meet the demands of the moment, organizations must be agile. They must execute flawlessly. And they must transform themselves continuously.

Are your leaders ready?

Dr. Noel M. Tichy

Professor

University of Michigan Ross School of Business

We have now entered an era where I don't care what industry you're in, you need leaders who can make decisions, make judgment calls at every single level. All the way down to the interface with the customer.

If you go to a company like Google or any of the high tech companies, a lot of the innovation that Amazon does is happening right at the front line. Go ahead, try it, put it out there, we'll learn from it. That cannot happen if the senior leadership doesn't have a commitment to both develop the leadership capability, but develop the business through engaging people at all levels of the organization.

Becoming a teaching organization

I like to tell parents that they cannot delegate their responsibility to develop their children. And I think it is the same in an organization. Day in and day out the person that has the biggest impact on people in the organization is the next level above and the associates around and below. And so to build a learning organization I say is not enough. Learning could be, you know we are learning cooking, we are learning this or that, but teaching organizations, when I learned something, I have a responsibility to teach my colleagues.

So everybody takes responsibility for generating new knowledge and it is not enough to be a learner, you then have to translate it into teaching.

The Virtuous Teaching Cycle

The role of a leader is to ensure that the people who work for them and around them are better every day. There's only one way to make people better. It's to teach them, learn from them, create what I call "virtuous teaching cycles", not command and control.

A virtuous teaching cycle is teach learn, teach learn. And the leader has a responsibility for reducing the hierarchy, for having a point of view to start the discussion, but then to be responsible to hear everyone's voice, get everyone involved in a disciplined way. It is not a free for all. But it is the leader's responsibility to create that virtuous teaching cycle.

A wonderful example of virtuous teaching cycle is the program that Roger Enrico ran at Pepsi, where every one of the 10 vice presidents comes with a business project.

Roger Enrico gets smarter as result of five days with 10 vice presidents, because he's learning from them. He needs to lower the hierarchy. He needs to be open to learning. And in turn, the people participating need to be energized and empowered to come up and engage in problem solving.

Another example is at Best Buy, where every morning in the stores you would bring 20 associates or so together and they would review the profit and loss statement from the day before, what we learned from the different customer segments in our stores, what we can do to improve our performance this day. And they do that every single day. The store manager was learning mostly from the associates on the floor.

That was a virtuous teaching cycle were everybody is teaching everybody, everybody is learning and the result has been an incredible result at Best Buy.

"The growth and development of people is the highest calling of leadership."

- Harvey S. Firestone

Founder, Firestone Tire and Rubber Co

There are clear advantages to leader-led development.

But for many leaders, taking on teaching, coaching, and other development responsibilities can seem daunting. You might avoid taking on these roles due to lack of time, resources, or your own lack of comfort with this role.

The following tips and resources can help you impart valuable learning to your team every day.

To develop others...

- Start with a Teachable Point of View

The first requirement of being able to develop other leaders is to have what I call a teachable point of view. I often give the example of, if I ran a tennis camp and you just came to day one of the tennis camp, I better have a teachable point of view on how I teach tennis. So you are standing there looking at me and it has got four elements. One, the ideas, well how do I teach the backhand, the forehand, the serve, rules of tennis. Then if I am a good tennis coach, I have a set of values. What are the right behaviors I want, how do I want you to dress, how do I want you to behave on the tennis court.

But if that's all I have, what do I do? Show you a power point presentation and then expect you to hit 500 backhands, 500 serves, run around for eight hours. I have to have a teachable point of view on emotional energy. How do I motivate you to buy in to the ideas and values?

On one end of the spectrum it could be I threaten you with corporal punishment, the other I can give you stock options, I can make you feel good about yourself, I can help you develop as a human being, what motivates you.

And then finally, how do I make the tough judgment calls, the yes/no, decisions as the tennis coach, the ball is in, the ball is out. I don't hire consultants and set up a committee, it is yes/no. And the same with running a business, what are the products, services, distribution channels, customer segments that are going to grow top line growth and profitability of the organization.

What are the values that I want everyone in the organization to have, how do I emotionally energize thousands of people, and then how do I make the yes/no, judgments on people and on business issues. So the fundamental building block of being able to develop other leaders is to have that teachable point of view just like the tennis coach.

To develop others...

- Lead with questions

Questions are hugely important because you want to create dialogue and again, what I call a virtuous teaching cycle where the teacher learns from the students and vice versa. Which means everybody ought to be free to ask whatever is on their mind, whatever it will take to get clarity and understanding, but it is not the leader just coming in and freeform asking questions. I believe the leader has a responsibility for framing the discussion, for having as best they can a teachable point of view, they may need help from their people in flushing it out, but they need to set the stage but then it has to be a very interactive, what I call virtuous teaching cycle environment, teach learn, teach learn, teach learn.

To develop others...

- Make it part of your routine

A good example to me of an outstanding leader developing other leaders is Myrtle Potter who at the time I am commenting was Chief Operating Officer of Genentech running the commercial side of the business. And she would take time at the end of every single meeting and do some coaching of the whole team on how we could perform as a team better, and then she would often take individuals and say, could we spend 10 minutes over a cup of coffee, I want to give you some feedback and coaching on that report that you just presented on or how you are handling a particularly difficult human resource issue, but it was part of her regular routine. And I think the challenge for all of us as leaders is to make that a way of life and it is built into the

fabric of how we lead and it is not a one off event, three times a year. It is happening almost every day.

To develop others...

- Make it a priority

One of the biggest challenges in getting people kind of on this path is to overcome some of their own resistance, either fear or the way I view the world I don't have time for this, everybody can make time. Roger Enrico is CEO of Pepsi. He didn't have time to go off for a week at a time and run training sessions. He had to readjust his calendar. So it requires you to look in the mirror and say, is this important. If it is important, of course I can make the time. Then I have to get over my own anxiety on how well I can do it, but it is a commitment to get on the path that says: this is how I am going to drive my own performance and the performance of my colleagues.

To develop others...

- Learn to teach

I think the biggest mistake is to assume you are going to be good at it right off the bat. It is like learning anything else. First time you go out and try and play tennis, good luck. But you got to stay with it and you got to engage your people in helping make you better and them better. And so it is a journey you need to get on, not I am going to do it perfectly when I start out.

If you want to be a great leader who is a great teacher, it's very simple. You have got to dive into the deep end of the pool. But you've got to dive into the pool with preparation. I don't want you drowning. I want you succeeding. It is extraordinarily rewarding for most human beings to teach others. I think once you can turn that switch on, it is self perpetuating. You get a lot of reinforcement, your team is better. You perform better because your performance goes up and it becomes this virtuous teaching cycle.

Your opportunity to develop others

We've heard why developing others can drive greater business results, and how to make the most of your leader-led development efforts. The materials provided in Develop Others enable you to create personalized learning experiences for YOUR team within the flow of their daily activities. Use the guides and projects to engage your team quickly. And to explore how key concepts apply to them in the context of their priorities and goals.

The value of teaching is the performance of the organization is totally dependent on making your people smarter and more aligned every day as the world changes. In the 21st century we are not going to get by with command and control. We are going to have to get by with knowledge creation. The way you create knowledge in an organization is you create these virtuous teaching cycles where you are teaching and learning simultaneously, responding to customer demands and changes, responding to changes in the global environment. My bottom line is if you're not teaching, you're not leading.

A leader's most important role in any organization is making good judgments — well informed, wise decisions about people, strategy and crises that produce the desired outcomes. When a leader shows consistently good judgment, little else matters. When he or she shows poor judgment nothing else

matters. In addition to making their own good judgment calls, good leaders develop good judgment among their team members.

Dr. Noel M. Tichy**Professor, University of Michigan Ross School of Business**

Dr. Noel M. Tichy is Professor of Management and Organizations, and Director of the Global Business Partnership at the University of Michigan Ross School of Business. The Global Business Partnership links companies and students around the world to develop and engage business leaders to incorporate global citizenship activities, both environmental projects and human capital development, for those at the bottom of the pyramid. Previously, Noel was head of General Electric's Leadership Center at Crotonville, where he led the transformation to action learning at GE. Between 1985 and 1987, he was Manager of Management Education for GE where he directed its worldwide development efforts at Crotonville. He currently consults widely in both the private and public sectors. He is a senior partner in Action Learning Associates. Noel is author of numerous books and articles, including:

For more information about Noel Tichy, visit <http://www.noeltichy.com>.

Share an Idea

Leaders are in a unique position to recognize the ideas and tools that are most relevant and useful for their teams. If you only have a few minutes, consider sharing an idea or tool from this topic with your team or peers that is relevant and timely to their situation.

For example, consider sending one of the three recommended ideas or tools below to your team with your comments or questions on how the idea or tool can be of value to your organization. By simply sharing the item, you can easily engage others in important conversations and activities relevant to your goals and priorities.

[Steps for planning your writing task](#)

[Tips for writing an e-mail message](#)

[Focus sheet™](#)

To share an idea, tip, step, or tool with your comments via e-mail, select the EMAIL link in the upper right corner of the page that contains the idea, tip, step, or tool that you wish to share.

Discussion 1: Taking a "reader-centered" approach

Just as a company won't connect with its *customers* if it fails to consider their needs and attitudes, you won't connect with *readers* of your communications if you don't understand precisely who they are, what they need, and how they prefer to receive information.

Using a reader-centered approach to writing makes the reader's job — and yours — much easier. When you write with your readers' perspectives in mind, readers understand exactly what you are trying to communicate and are more likely to respond favorably to your message.

Your team members can make substantial contributions to your unit or department by improving their capacity to take a "reader-centered" approach to written communications.

Use these resources to lead a discussion with your team about three key aspects of reader-centered writing: (1) understanding what your readers value; (2) anticipating readers' questions; and (3)

deciding on your delivery strategy.

Download resources:

[Discussion Invitation: Taking a "Reader-Centered" Approach](#)

[Discussion Guide: Taking a "Reader-Centered" Approach](#)

[Discussion Slides: Taking a "Reader-Centered" Approach \(optional\)](#)

[Tips for Preparing for and Leading the Discussion](#)

The discussion helps individual team members understand and apply techniques for putting their readers' interests first.

Working through the discussion guide can take up to 45 minutes. If you prefer a shorter 15- or 30-minute session, you may want to focus only on those concepts and activities most relevant to your situation.

Discussion 2: Writing effective e-mail

It's so easy to send an e-mail that often it doesn't seem like writing at all. But e-mail is a serious form of correspondence that requires the same kind of attention that business letters, memos, and reports receive.

You and your team can make substantial contributions to your unit or department by improving your ability to write effective e-mail. Fortunately, there are a number of sound writing and communication principles that your team can apply to the e-mail format.

Use these resources to lead a discussion with your team about using e-mail more effectively, including: (1) avoiding common pitfalls when drafting e-mail; (2) understanding best practices for writing e-mail; and (3) developing team guidelines for use of e-mail.

Download resources:

[Discussion Invitation: Writing Effective E-Mail](#)

[Discussion Guide: Writing Effective E-Mail](#)

[Discussion Slides: Writing Effective E-Mail \(optional\)](#)

[Tips for Preparing for and Leading the Discussion](#)

The discussion you have with your team members will help them to understand and apply techniques for writing effective e-mail.

Working through the discussion guide can take up to 45 minutes. If you prefer a shorter 15- or 30-minute session, you may want to focus only on those concepts and activities most relevant to your situation.

Start a Group Project

Just like any change effort, successfully incorporating new skills and behaviors into one's daily activities and habits takes time and effort. After reviewing or discussing the concepts in this topic, your direct reports will still need your support to fully apply new concepts and skills. They will need to overcome a variety of barriers including a lack of time, lack of confidence, and a fear of making

mistakes. They will also need opportunities to hone their skills and break old habits. To help ensure their success, you can provide safe opportunities for individuals and your team as a whole to practice and experiment with new skills and behaviors on the job.

For example, to encourage the adoption of new norms, you can provide your team members with coaching, feedback, and additional time to complete tasks that require the use of new skills. Management approaches such as these will encourage team members to experiment with new skills until they become proficient.

Group learning projects provide another valuable technique for accelerating team members' development of new behaviors. A group learning project is an on-the-job activity aimed at providing team members with direct experience implementing their new knowledge and skills. Through a learning project, team members discover how new concepts work in the context of their situation, while simultaneously having a direct and tangible impact on the organization.

The documents below provide steps, tips, and a template for initiating a group learning project with your team, along with two project recommendations for this topic.

Download resources:

[Tips for Initiating and Supporting a Learning Project](#)
[Learning Project Plan Template](#)
[Learning Project: Peer-to-Peer Editing](#)
[Learning Project: Collaborative Team Writing](#)

Five Quick Ways to Trim—and Improve—Business Writing

John Clayton. "Five Quick Ways to Trim—and Improve—Business Writing." *Harvard Management Update*, September 2008.

[Download file](#)

Summary

At a time when we're all working smarter and faster and the Internet has dramatically changed how people read and absorb information, business writing needs to be relentlessly concise. And yet it has to deliver complex information clearly and persuasively. Whether you're writing an e-mail message or a 100-page report, the challenge is the same: cut length without losing meaning. This article offers five tips on how you can do just this—painlessly and professionally.

The Best Memo You'll Ever Write

Holly Weeks. "The Best Memo You'll Ever Write." *Harvard Management Communication Letter*, April 2005.

[Download file](#)

Summary

There is a lot of advice out there about what defines good business writing, much of it conflicting. The truth is that there is a better way to approach business writing. Start from these three realities: business readers are content driven, time pressed, and in search of solutions. They want to get the content out of your memo or report at speed—if they could get it without reading, they would. They need to solve a problem or make a decision, and they need your information, ideas, and recommendations to help them. What does that mean to a writer? Read this article to find out how to write right every time.

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